

State of Connecticut

African-American Affairs Commission

State Capitol

210 Capitol Avenue – Room 509

Hartford, CT 06106

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Education Committee

Testimony of Glenn A. Cassis, Executive Director of the African-American Affairs Commission

Raised H.B. 5491 – An Act Concerning Certain School Districts Reforms to Reduce the Achievement Gap in Connecticut

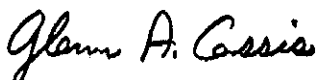
Good Afternoon members of the Education Committee. The top priority on the agenda for the African-American Affairs Commission is the issue of education. The one variable that has a direct causal relationship with the disparities that exist with African-Americans in the areas of economic development, health, employment, the criminal justice system and education is the achievement gap. The gap continues to exist in the classrooms of elementary and secondary schools in Connecticut.

For decades African-American students have not been afforded the opportunity to achieve an education that will prepare them for a career with an income sufficient to raise a family in Connecticut. The State has fallen short in its obligation to provide most African-American students with the skills required to meet the challenges for being competitive in the global economy. As a result of this failure, African-Americans continue have the highest rate of unemployment, the lowest per capita income, the largest percentage of any racial group incarcerated in the state's correctional institutions, the demographic with the highest rate of morbidity from cancer, hypertension, AIDS and diabetes to reference a few and the largest high school dropout rate. The repeated decades of failure has, in the opinion of the Commission, resulted in a civil rights violation for African-American children attending public schools in Connecticut.

The State of Connecticut now has the opportunity to implement a plan of action necessary to change the educational landscape. The State Department of Education has for several years proposed a plan to raise high school graduation standards. If approved by the Legislature (H.B. 5489), these standards will compliment requirements necessary for successful admission and completion of college or preparation for employment with a sustainable income. Connecticut will once again submit an application for Race To The Top which has the potential to infuse nearly two hundred million dollars into a strategy to overhaul how the State educates students. Both courses of actions are necessary to improve education in Connecticut however none of this will come to any degree of success unless measures are taken to eliminate the achievement gap.

H.B. 5491 offers bold steps that will seriously address eliminating the achievement gap for all students. Parental engagement and empowerment will give parents an important tool that is long overdue. The "Parent Trigger" provides a mechanism for parents and educators to be held to a higher degree of accountability. Annual two parent-teacher conferences and offering parents the ability to force poor performing schools to be reconstituted are in the best interest of children. The "Trigger" would only be used for schools that fail to make progress for several years in a row. Efforts must be made to discourage students from dropping out of high school before the age of majority. Offering credit recovery and online courses are two concrete steps to keep students on the path towards completing high school. Guidelines outlined in this bill for measuring teacher performance with student outcomes are long overdue. Student outcomes will not be based on one assessment but on the academic growth of the students. These measurements will be determined by a team of parents and the education community from the respective districts.

In conclusion the longer we wait before taking bold actions, the larger the gap widens. The gap has gone beyond poor and affluent school districts. The issue now must address how Connecticut can remain competitive nationally and globally. H.B. 5491 provides Connecticut with clear steps to close the achievement gap. I urge you to act favorably on H.B. 5491.



Glenn A. Cassis
Executive Director